

OUT OF THE HOUSE

January 26 - March 1, 1978

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
DOWNTOWN BRANCH



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Household objects and activities are a significant source for women artists, both as images and as techniques for making art. Though women are not alone in treating domestic themes, their use of such themes is colored by the traditional association between women and the home. How do women now approach a controversial cultural tradition, the heritage of domesticity, in their art?

The question refers not to an innate sensibility to certain objects or activities but to a culturally imposed familiarity with these things. Women have a special relationship to domestic functions, having been brought up to maintain a household, i.e., cooking, cleaning and sewing, or seeing their mothers and grandmothers in this role. Women today can reaffirm or reject the values of that tradition, can ridicule it, accept it, ignore it or attempt to ignore it. All these attitudes are evident in recent art by women who directly or indirectly have included domestic references in their works.

Many women artists have spoken of the initial difficulty in working with a traditionally female medium like fabric. In the early 1970s men were creating works with fabric and other materials and methods not traditionally associated with art. Women who used the same techniques found it more difficult to be taken seriously. It was too easy to assume that a woman sewing was doing "craft" and not "high art," because of the existing context of women's crafts. Nevertheless, some women have used their familiarity with fabrics to pursue their art. In Paula Tavins's piece, small stuffed bags are stitched by sewing machine to an unstretched canvas that has a grid drawn upon it. Paint is also added as an integral but not dominant element of the composition. Both the drawn grid, as a metaphor of the weaving process, and the loose canvas refer to cloth as a basic element in household industry.

Colette creates an extravagantly sensual environment using her collection of old materials, including silk parachutes, to drape walls and furniture. She often inhabits her environments, sometimes including her own clothing as part of the installation. Home is the locus of Colette's works; her installations are nests with herself in the center. She uses the mode of interior decoration, a form of expression with which women have long been familiar, and carries it to extremes. She creates a surreal, highly individualized atmosphere of narcissism and voluptuousness.

Other women artists have continued to demonstrate their familiarity with activities that are part of the domestic cycle of activity. Pat Lasch, whose work deals with genealogy and family history, has used embroidery to create art objects. Lately, she has returned to a process she employed earlier, using cake decorating techniques with family photographs to treat nostalgic, personal themes.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles began to think about the possibilities of making art from the routine maintenance chores brought about by the birth of her first child. Her "Manifesto for Maintenance Art" of 1969 comes from the time when she was first defining this concern. Since then she has worked from her personal experience with maintenance activities outward to include other people whose job involves systems of maintenance. By focussing her attention on these repetitive, boring activities, she invests them with a dignity that is normally suppressed.

Techniques are one way to refer to domestic activities; imagery is another. Joyce Stillman Meyers's Sweet Baby, showing a sink full of suds and dishes, clearly delineates a domestic context. Ellen Lanyon has used common household objects and the house itself as an image for conveying her themes of metamorphosis, camouflage and escape in domestic terms. Her lithograph of a hermit crab with a house on its back is an example. Janet Stayton creates a summarizing iconography of simple pleasures centered around the home: her recurring image is that of a coffee cup. In La Vita - Green Cup, the image, fabrics, fragmentation and grid are all elements that are cited in recent criticism as potentially feminine references. Lucy Lippard has suggested a particular affinity between women and uses of the grid format as a container or connective structure. Similarly, fragmentation has been seen as an analogue for the patterns of a woman's life, which is split apart by demands for attention from children, husband, job and housework.

For many women, the domestic elements that are intrinsic to their art are an acknowledged part of their own lives. For others, the domestic sphere is seen more clearly in a previous generation. Cara Devito's videotape about her grandmother, an immigrant Italian-American, and Nancy Holt's evocation of her Aunt Ethel emphasize the circumscription of these older women's lives within the home. The materials for Miriam Schapiro's collages include fabric pieces worked on by anonymous women of earlier generations.

Early in the 1970's, when feminism was gaining strength in the art world, a body of art dealing specifically with women's traditional role in society began to develop. Women artists became interested in taking the circumstances of a woman's life, which were largely absent from the content of mainstream art, and making them the concern of their art. Much of this work is as much exorcism as affirmation. One source for this kind of art was the Feminist Art Program at California Institute of the Arts, guided by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, which produced Womanhouse in 1971 as a communal project. Each room of an abandoned house was transformed by the women according to their perceptions of that room and of the emotions and ideas associated with it. Miriam Schapiro's Dollhouse was originally installed in one of the rooms of Womanhouse. It embodies many of the fears and dark subconscious aspects of the home: a monster in the baby's crib, faceless men at the kitchen window.

Investigation of women's sources was also going on in other parts of the country at this time. New York, as the economic center of the art world, presented a special challenge. Women artists were particularly concerned with entering the existing political and economic structure. Places like A.I.R., a cooperative gallery of women artists in Soho, provided an alternative for the support of feminist concerns. Harmony Hammond, an early member of A.I.R., was working at that time with a group of artists attempting to define women's experience in their art. She had been experimenting with materials like rags and hair, and with techniques like crochet, working to convey an essential female experience. Her Presences evoke a female personage who grows from women's existence, but at a primitive and thus basic level of human culture.

Another member of this group, Patsy Norvell, was also working with unorthodox materials, including vinyl shelf ruffles and hair from the haircuts she gave her friends. Hair Quilt, one of the largest in a series of works, borrows its form from the traditional quilt. The grid makes reference to an origin in domestic crafts.

Though there have been attempts to define recent women's art, it is not a movement in any stylistic sense. Nor can women be said to deal with a limited range of subject matter or techniques. Certain themes like domesticity attract women because of a special relevance to aspects of their cultural experience. However, all women do not approach these themes in the same manner, and the art that results is richly varied.

The exhibition has been organized by the following Helena Rubinstein Fellows in the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program: Kathleen Barkett, Indiana University; Ann Beldecos, Swarthmore College; Kathi Norklun, University of Minnesota; Margot Norton, New York University Institute of Fine Arts; and Nancy Princenthal, University of Pennsylvania.

The Downtown Branch of the Whitney Museum is under the direction of David Hupert, Head of the Whitney Museum's Education Department. The Branch Manager is Lisa Phillips.

Other Helena Rubinstein Fellows in the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program are: Wendy Persson, Vassar College; Barbara Petersen, New York University; Deborah Phillips, Skidmore College; Helaine Posner, George Washington University; and Barbara Wilson, California State University, Long Beach.

The Downtown Branch of the Whitney Museum of American Art, located at 55 Water Street, is supported by the business community of lower Manhattan and the National Endowment for the Arts. The Independent Study Program is sponsored by the Helena Rubinstein Foundation with assistance from the Samuel H. Kress Foundation. The Museum is open Monday through Friday 11-3. Admission is free.

SHERRY BRODY

Sewing Up a Picture, 1975

Pen and ink on paper

23 x 25 inches

Collection of Miriam Schapiro

CYNTHIA CARLSON

Katzenjammer, 1976

Acrylic on wood

54 x 71 inches

Collection of the artist

SUSAN RUTH COHEN

Untitled, 1977

Drawing on paper

22 1/2 x 30 inches

Courtesy of Kathryn Markel Fine Arts

COLETTE

Out of My House (1973), re-executed 1978

Silk, satin, lights, construction, photographs

Collection of the artist

IRENE FAY

Neat Drawer with Silverware, 1969

Black and white photograph

3 1/2 x 4 inches

Courtesy of the Witkin Gallery

SUSAN HALL

The Dinner, artist's proof, 1973

Etching with watercolor

17 1/4 x 22 5/8 inches

Courtesy of Brooke Alexander Gallery

HARMONY HAMMOND

Presence V, 1972

Acrylic on fabric, wooden hanger

78 x 28 x 18 inches

Collection of the artist

Presence VI, 1972

Acrylic on fabric, wooden hanger

80 x 33 x 14 inches

Collection of the artist

MARIANNA KNOTTENBELT

Untitled, c. 1976

Type C color photograph

14 x 11 inches

Courtesy of Castelli Graphics

KAY KURT

Jujubes from the National, 1976

Oil on canvas

14 inch radius

Courtesy of Kornblee Gallery

ELLEN LANYON

Hermit Crab, 1976

Hand colored lithograph on paper, #18/50

22 1/2 x 30 inches

Courtesy of Kathryn Markel Fine Arts

Silk Cabby III, 1973

Acrylic on linen

6 x 9 feet

Collection of the artist

PAT LASCH

Pat Lasch 1944, 1950, 1951, 1969, 1977, 1977

Oil and photographs on linen

5 panels, 12 x 12 inches each

Collection of the artist

JOANNE LEONARD

More Romantic Notions Leafing, 1973

Black and white photo-collage

16 x 12 inches

Collection of Miriam Schapiro

JOYCE STILLMAN MEYERS

A Jar, 1977

Pastel on paper

24 x 18 inches

Courtesy of Meisel Gallery

Sweet Baby, 1977

Oil on canvas

55 x 64 inches

Courtesy of Meisel Gallery

MARILYN MINTER

Broken Glass, 1977

Oil on canvas

14 1/2 x 16 3/4 inches

Collection of the artist

CLAIRE MOORE

It Was Winter, 1977

Acrylic and ink on paper

14 x 34 inches

Courtesy of Kathryn Markel Fine Arts

ANN MULLIN

Untitled, 1976

Colored pencil on paper

18 x 18 inches

Collection of Pat Lasch

PATSY NORVELL

Untitled, 1972-73

Hair, Scotch magic tape, vinyl

78 x 62 inches

Collection of the artist

ELAINE REICHEK

Pink Piece, 1977

Organdy, silk thread, pencil, paper

10 panels, 10 x 9 inches each

Courtesy of Parsons/Dreyfuss Gallery

LEATRICE ROSE

Studio Table/Groups of Three, 1975

Oil on canvas

57 x 68 inches

Courtesy of Tibor de Nagy Gallery

MIRIAM SCHAPIRO with SHERRY BRODY

Dollhouse, 1972

Mixed media

84 x 41 x 40 inches

Collection of Miriam Schapiro

MIRIAM SCHAPIRO

She Sweeps with Many Colored Brooms, 1976

Acrylic and collage on canvas

40 x 32 inches

Collection of the artist

Veil of Tears, 1976

Acrylic and collage on canvas

40 x 32 inches

Collection of the artist

JANET STAYTON

La Vita - Green Cup, 1977

Acrylic and mixed media on canvas

60 x 80 inches

Courtesy of Hamilton Gallery

MARJORIE STRIDER

Brooms, 1972

Mixed media

5 x 11 x 10 feet

Collection of the artist

Peel Three, 1977
Painted cast aluminum
21 x 12 x 16 inches
Collection of the artist

PAULA TAVINS
Hidden Words, 1976-77
Magna paint on canvas
59 x 71 inches
Courtesy of Renee Brody Fine Art

MIERLE LADERMAN UKELES
Manifesto for Maintenance Art, 1969
Typing on paper
4 sheets, 8 1/2 x 11 inches each
Collection of the Artist

VIDEO

CARA DEVITO
Ama L'Uomo Tuo (Always Love Your Man), 1975
Color and b/w video, 30 minutes
Lent by the artist

NANCY HOLT
Underscan, 1974
B/w video, 8 minutes
Distributed by Castelli-Sonnabend Tapes and Films

SUSAN LANDRY
Wife, 1977
B/w video, 1 minute 40 seconds
Lent by the artist

MARTHA ROSLER
Semiotics of the Kitchen, 1974
B/w video, 7 minutes
Lent by the artist

SUSAN RUSSELL
Devotion, 1977
Color video, 10 minutes
Lent by the artist

ILENE SEGALOVE
Tortillas and Tuna, 1975
B/w video, 11 minutes
Lent by the artist

INGRID WIEGAND
Walking, 1975
B/w video, 18 minutes
Lent by the artist

PERFORMANCE

Thursday, January 26, 5-7 PM
Colette
The Last Stitch (1978)

Fridays at 12:30

January 27 Yvonne Rainer
Inner Appearances (1972) Two versions;
performed by John Erdman and Margot Norton

February 3 Jacki Apple
Bedtime Stories, Lullabies, and Other Lies (1977)

February 10 Barbara Kruger
7 Minutes in the Bathroom (1978)

February 17 Martha Wilson
Story Lines/Stuck in Buffalo '77 (1977)

February 24 Mierle Laderman Ukeles
Maintenance Art Myth: In, Up, Out, Up (1978)

FILM

Wednesday, February 8, at 12:30, Womanhouse (1974)